

STATEMENT OF REP. EDWARD MARKEY
Press Conference on Approval of V-Chip/TV Ratings
March 12, 1998

Thank you everyone for coming to help mark this milestone in the history of American television. Today, the Federal Communications Commission said "Yes" to the V-Chip so that parents can say "No" to violent or sexually explicit TV programming in their living rooms. At the direction of Congress, with the encouragement of the Administration, with the approval of parents and citizen groups, and with the near-complete cooperation of the television industry, America can now proceed with the distribution of the V-Chip - a technology which is likely to prove at least as important for television as the seat belt has been for the automobile.

The FCC approval of the V-Chip specifications allows the makers of TV sets to finally make and sell new TV sets with the V-Chip included. And with the simultaneous approval of the TV Parental Guidelines, the creators and distributors of television programming can now have confidence that their voluntary ratings system, agreed to with parents groups last summer and implemented last October, will match up with the V-Chip to allow blocking of violent or sexually explicit programming.

Only with the approval of both halves do we now have a whole. Just as the V-Chip without ratings is like a car without gas, the ratings system without the V-Chip is like gas without a car. Today's action means that parents with small children will soon have both working parts of a safety system that provides a little control for a change.

While July 1999 is the FCC deadline for 50% of TV sets to have the V-chip, we expect "V-Chip ready" TV sets to be on the market by Christmas 1998, in a race with some cable operators who can now include the V-Chip in upgrades of cable set-top boxes. And if you want one even sooner, there are entrepreneurs such as Soundview or TriVision who are promising to sell you a stand-alone V-Chip system within a few months.

The industry has indicated its full intent to encode TV signals with the ratings promptly - within 30 days in some cases, and in no less than 90 days in all cases.

Major print media, such as the TV Guide and USA Today, are printing the full content labels so that parents have the information they need to know what will be blocked when.

Educational undertakings are taking root. The National Cable Television Association has launched its "Tools to Use" project, using Captain Kangaroo to draw public attention to this new technology and the ratings. The National Association of Broadcasters has produced and its members are airing Public Service Announcements, and has produced hundreds of thousands of brochures in English and Spanish to get the word out through PTAs, doctors offices and parents groups. There is even a web site --<http://www.tvguidelines.org>.

There is now an official monitoring board to field and resolve the inevitable questions that arise when two similar shows get different ratings.

So we are celebrating a major development involving our television networks, our entertainment industry, the makers of TV sets, parents organizations and health experts, all working together in 99 percent consensus and unanimity.

That is what makes it so disappointing when a network with the proud history of NBC or the

prominence in this town of BET refuse to cooperate. The system is voluntary, so they are well within their legal rights. But it is wrong - just plain wrong - for them to assert these rights in a way that is guaranteed to anger parents. Essentially, they are asserting their rights to plant a "bug" in the system. Just as a "bug" in a computer does not render the computer useless, the NBC/BET virus will not significantly harm the operation of the V-Chip on every other channel. But it is a nuisance and a pain and is totally unnecessary.

Today we are writing the CEOs of NBC and BET and asking them, once again, to step up to a higher standard than the Bart Simpson "underachiever and proud of it" standard they have met so far.

We are also writing the National Newspaper Association, asking them to urge their more slow-moving members to print the ratings in the TV grids of all major dailies. That's where parents go to see what's on, so that's where the ratings should be.

Despite these loose ends, the progress we have made is extraordinary in the five short years since I introduced the first V-Chip bill in the House.

There are many V-Chip valedictorians and ratings revivalists who made this possible. Many of them are here today. The parents groups, the medical experts, the citizen representatives who gathered the support for the V-Chip and who hammered out the ratings system are well-represented here today by Dr. Ivor Horn, who will speak shortly.

Senator Byron Dorgan was the Senate pioneer who introduced the first V-Chip bill in the Senate.

Senators Kent Conrad and Joe Lieberman led the successful fight on the Senate floor, igniting public interest in this technological wonder and sparking the movement.

Reps Dan Burton, Jim Moran and John Spratt forged an alliance with me in the House that proved unstoppable in the face of all manner of parliamentary machinations. I can't tell you what a difference it made to have these three able people, each with their own unique experiences and gift for advocacy, sweeping through the House of Representatives to salvage this effort when the V-chips were down.

Vice-President Gore blessed this legislation at every critical moment, and President Clinton called the summit that established the framework for industry cooperation and progress.

Jack Valenti took charge of the fractious industry coalition and forged the first draft of the ratings system that became the basis for constructive compromise with parents. Without Jack, I do not believe it would have been possible to unite so many disparate and competitive industry players around this objective, no matter how worthy.

Senator John McCain, Chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, and his ranking Democrat Fritz Hollings, made this whole project the highest priority, insisting that the views of parents be heard and honored in the discussion over adding content to the ratings system.

Thank you to Bill Kennard, Chairman of the FCC, for shepherding this cause through the commission on a 5-0 vote that bodes well for the V-Chip's smooth transition the drawing board into America's living rooms.

I also want to recognize Eddie Fritts of the NAB and Decker Anstrom of the NCTA for all the time, effort, experience and good judgment they have brought to this very complex undertaking.

And I also want to recognize Gary Shapiro of the Consumer Electronics Manufacturing Association, who first brought to my attention the possibility of building blocking technology on top of the closed captioning chip. When I started tossing around catchy phrases such as "V-Chip" to describe what he was talking about, Gary knew he was in trouble. He never wanted this mandated, but of course without the mandate on his set makers, there would be no ratings system to bring the V-Chip to life.

Thank you to all these stars and so many more. We have left the era of Leave It To Beaver and entered the era of Beavis and Butthead. I am very happy we have seen fit to upgrade the "on/off" button of the 1950s to meet the challenges of the new millennium. As President Clinton has said "it's just a small chip, but it's a very big deal for parents."

Thank you.